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ABSTRACT

The article looks at the role of play and recreation in the lives of children with learning disabilities and suggests ways parents can help integrate such children into recreation and sports programs. The importance of three systems of support--the family, the school, and the peer group--is stressed. Parents are urged to work toward providing the peer group support and camaraderie of group recreation. Parents are also encouraged to list the child's greatest weaknesses and then identify activities where these weaknesses woul not be noticed. It is recommended that parents who volunteer to lead groups should "stack the deck" in favor of learning disabled children by enabling them to avoid the parts of a group activity that would expose their weaknesses while assigning them other roles that would utilize their strengths. Other ways parents can help is by initiating a new group activity in which all participants are equally inexperienced, having the child practice well in advance for activities requiring tryouts, and having the child try out for activities with few competitors. (DB)

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Recreation for Children with Learning Disabilities

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Parents are their child's first, and in many ways, most important teacher. Long before your child starts school, you have begun to teach him social awareness; these lessons continue throughout his life at home and usually into adult life. As children grow, they rely on three major systems of support: their family, the school, and their peer group. All three of these systems contribute to the growth of an individual, even when one or more are not working as well as the other(s) (*Recreation in the community: A step-by-step guide for parents of children with handicaps*, 1984). While at school, your child will develop communication skills; learn how to get along with others; and gain self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-control. Of course, your child will be with other children—his peers—some of whom will be friends, some of whom will be supportive, some of whom he will not get along with, and those who make up the rest of the student body, with whom he will be each day. From early childhood throughout life, we are with other people either at work, at play, or incidentally in stores, buses, elevators, restaurants, recreation centers, church, or any other public place. For a child with learning disabilities, making friends with some of the people around him may be the most difficult task of all. As your child's parent and the most important adult in his life, you may have to establish your child in groups that are "right" for him. In this paper, we discuss how you can promote social and recreation situations that will benefit not only your child but those around him. Parents of children with disabilities share their experiences and what has worked for them.

Children need to play. Play and recreation are normal aspects of development. Recreation can be solitary, social, or in teams. Activities associated with each of these require certain levels of skill. Recreational activities are structured to encourage children and adolescents to pursue areas of talent and skill and to expand and develop abilities. Often, rivalry is encouraged as children emulate the world of competition. Value is placed on excellence, on perfection, or on being good. Excellence is measured by skill level, physical qualities, and quickness. That's why we have little league teams, swim teams, soccer teams, intramural teams, contests, races, and the like. By the time a child enters elementary school, an array of sports and recreational activities are available. As the child gets older, the recreational activities become more competitive and more formalized. In team sports, people need to try out for the team; then, only the best are chosen. Plays, concerts, fairs, and community center activities are competitive. Summer camps begin to specialize in certain interest areas. By high school, students need to qualify for almost all activities. They need to try out for school plays or chorus; only the most talented students are in art club or French club; the sports teams are extremely competitive; scouts are more complex; and the few camps which attract adolescents specialize in sports, orienteering, drama, computers, etc.

This world of perfection of mind and body may be overwhelming and seemingly unobtainable for a child with learning disabilities. Society initially gives the credit to those who are quick. Those who take their time and those who show effort and perseverance often become discouraged before their skills are credited, if ever.

To even begin a recreation program, certain skill levels are needed. This may present a serious disincentive for some children. The child who joins the five-year-old soccer team is the child who runs and can kick a ball with some accuracy. The eight year old who goes out for baseball can usually hit and catch a ball. The twelve year old who auditions for chorus can sing and can remember the words to the songs. These

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children have been encouraged by their families, teachers, and peers to "go out for the team" because they are good at something.

What about the child who isn't particularly good at something? Interest in recreational activities and sports may be there even when obvious talent is not. A child with poor coordination, who can't remember the rules, and who is not particularly popular with his peers may, none-the-less, be interested in joining the team, in participating in a group, and in sharing in the fun he sees others having.

What is the answer? Much of the appeal of recreation is camaraderie. Building model planes may be a great hobby but it's not social. The social aspects of recreation are really what is most important. This often is especially true for the child who is experiencing difficulties in school. Friendships are, after all, built on commonalities. The student with learning disabilities may be different from her classmates, but she may not be different from her teammates. It is then possible that acceptance and friendship may be better found outside the classroom. Susan, who has learning disabilities and is mainstreamed into a regular fifth-grade class and goes to the resource room for part of each day, made this comment, "We have thirty-one kids in our class, but I feel like I'm all alone. I guess it's because I'm the only one with a learning disability." Obviously, Susan is having a hard time—socially as well as academically—in her school environment. Yet, after school Susan goes to the YMCA for drill with her swim team. There, among teammates, she is known to have extreme endurance and is considered a leader among the group. Having been a member of the swim team for twelve months, Susan has made friends, improved her physical capabilities, fostered her self-esteem, developed self-expression and her leadership skills, and become a contributing member of her peer group. In Susan's situation, acceptance and friendship are best established where differences are not apparent. Yet, it is worth noting that prior to Susan joining the YMCA, she and her family thought she wasn't particularly good at anything—she didn't always follow the rules and oftentimes tripped over her own feet.

Having been a member of the swim team for twelve months, Susan has made friends, improved her physical capabilities, fostered her self-esteem, developed self-expression and her leadership skills, and become a contributing member of her peer group.

Where Differences are Not Apparent

In the example above, Susan experienced "success" in an environment where her learning disability went unnoticed. If we accept the concept that potential success is greatly enhanced in recreation activities where differences are not apparent, or minimized, then a goal would be to identify circumstances under which no one would notice a child's difficulties. While this may sound a bit flippant, the concept is worth investigating.

Successful integration of children with learning disabilities into recreation and sports programs really can happen. As your child's primary advocate, you will need to do some in-depth planning. This will call for creativity and flexibility. The following perspective is one option.

One mom's perspective. This plan worked for Joe. These strategies are meant to be used as an example; like an IEP in school, all must be personalized for each child or adolescent. The first step is the most difficult. Begin by making a list of your child's greatest difficulties—those traits or skills at which he is worst. In other words, put together a list of your child's weakest points or those things he does badly and are easily noticed by those around him.

Next, take the list you generated in Step One and, for each item, make another list of activities where these weaknesses would not be evident. Joe's situation illustrates this step. Joe is 11 years old and in a self-contained class in school. His "first list" looks like this: Joe is poorly coordinated, extremely active, has a severe speech impediment, and hates to lose at anything. He gets confused when a game has a lot of rules, doesn't run very fast, is usually too loud, is socially immature, and does not have many friends. Where would no one notice these behaviors? Actually, some of them will be noticed anywhere, so the question becomes, in what situations would the behaviors be noticed least?

There are answers to this question. Some recreational activities do not require much coordination, have few rules, require little discussion, are always loud, and are very active. Joe's "second list" includes the following activities: swimming, camping, bowling, and flying model power planes or kites. Once the child's list of difficulties has been matched with activities which avoid these difficulties, the direction is set. Following a few rules will lead to appropriate recreational opportunities.

Rule One: Always go where no one will notice. Continuing with the example of Joe, listing the weaknesses and identifying activities are only the beginning. Now, for these activities to be successful, the other children have to accept Joe. This presents the first hurdle: what other children? None of the activities on Joe's list are found in formal team-type recreational programs. Therefore, he will need to join an existing group or create one. A child with few

friends is not likely to be invited into an existing group, nor is he likely to attract other children to him. You may assist in attracting others to your child. Osman (1982) encourages parents to arrange social contacts, even with "bait" if necessary. A well-stocked refrigerator, a trip to the zoo, or a pinball machine may encourage a friend to visit and result in friendship, laughter, and relaxation during your child's free time.

Swimming, camping, bowling, and flying kites or model planes can take place informally. This is probably not a very realistic goal for Joe. Joe's recreational activity requires a group, as children will not readily come over to play with him. The alternative is to identify a group which does these things, such as a youth or scout group. Youth groups associated with religious organizations and scout troops are generally very open about accepting all children. However, they do not limit the scope of their activities to those on Joe's "good" list. Integration means everyone is there, not just other children with disabilities.

Stack the Deck

The family's role becomes particularly important. One fact well worth recognizing is that there are never enough volunteers to organize and run such groups. Youth and scout groups are, therefore, very receptive to a parent, aunt or uncle, or close friend who volunteers to work for the group. Now is the time to **stack the deck.** If Mother becomes the group leader or works at the organizational level, the group's activities will be directly in her control. It may be difficult to come up with activities at which a child can be predictably good; however, it is not at all difficult to avoid those activities at which a child will be predictably poor. Referring to list one, activities will be chosen to avoid those things Joe does badly. In so doing, the matching list of "where no one will notice" gets longer.

Obviously, this doesn't always work out simply. With integration as a goal, not everyone in the group will have limitations either in terms of skill or interest. If activities don't appeal to the majority of the group, then all is lost. Now, it is time to **stack the deck.**

For example, the group wants to play a competitive highly structured game such as baseball. Joe will be predictably poor at baseball. It has rules, requires players to be still for periods of time, necessitates hitting a ball and catching balls, and someone always loses. What are the possible success areas? Let's examine a hypothetical baseball game being played on a warm day by a group of children ages ten to twelve. What **exactly** are they doing? Who are the ones who are most popular? Obviously, the best players are most popular so let's look further. If it's a warm day, everyone will want a drink. Joe could volunteer to bring a jug of juice to each game. Every time anyone wants a drink, Joe will be available to run over and get it. The strengths are: 1) Since everyone will want a drink several times during any given game, everyone will be calling Joe at some point and Joe will feel wanted. 2) Joe's very active while the game is slow. Thus, this is not only a popular activity, but one Joe does well. Who will notice that he isn't much of a baseball player?

What else would be wanted at baseball games? A team photographer could provide great action shots of the individual players and might also approach a local paper to print a story about the team. Again, Joe could do this. The team photographer role makes him popular with his teammates, needs little discussion, requires no rules, allows for throwing away mistakes before anyone sees them, and entails running around during the game. As the team's photographer, Joe would likely receive an introduction to the community through the local paper. Who will notice that he isn't much of a baseball player?

The baseball activity has positive effects. Joe's self-esteem will build as he becomes an accepted member of a group. He may be invited to participate in other activities with some of the same children; he will develop some more appropriate social skills, acquire skills in photography, get some vocational experience, and have fun.

The parent who volunteers to lead a group of children will become enormously popular with the other children's parents, who will then be supportive of the child with learning disabilities. The mother or dad who stands up at a meeting and says,

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"I'll do it." is never criticized. The **deck has been stacked.** Another important point is that if parents work at the organizational level of a group, they do not necessarily have to work directly with their child. It's important for children to be away from their parents and make it on their own. For young or particularly shy children, it may be advantageous for a parent to be the group leader, at least at first; for other children, it may be imperative that their parent isn't there all the time.

Let's back up. Suppose there just isn't any where to go where no one will notice. This leads to Rule Two.

Rule Two: Go where no one knows how to do it and again stack the deck. If you can't find a safe haven, then find an activity where "to-not-know-how-to-do-it-well" is true for everyone. For example, suppose a group gathers and no activity is appropriate for the child with learning disabilities. Perhaps a new activity, such as fossil hunting, would be accepted as interesting. How many people know how to find fossils? This activity is active, can be loud, requires little discussion, has few rules, and does not require good coordination: a promising list of characteristics. Again, **stack the deck.** Before leaving on this activity, buy a few fossils and keep them handy.

If no one knows how to locate fossils, everyone will need to consult books or guides. It is reasonable for the adults to be constantly explaining how to do it and correcting some of the explorers. Everyone will be confused, ask too many questions, and need a lot of one-on-one help. What happens to Joe? No one will notice that he doesn't know what he's doing because no one knows what s/he is doing.

Now's the time to **stack the deck.** After a while, unsuccessful fossil hunting can become boring. Thus, guarantee success by dropping a few fossils where they are sure to be found. Who finds the first fossil? No, not Joe. Who would believe that? But, you can be sure he'll find at least one! By the time the children become proficient in fossil hunting, Joe will have had time to learn too. Even if he proves to be poor at this activity, one can always get out the list again and look at the strengths. After all, someone needs to clean the fossils. Joe can carry some Fantastik. Before long, his fellow fossil explorers will be calling him to "come over here" to help them clean their fossils.

It is probably honest to note that this plan requires a great deal of dedication and time from your family. It's a high price, but certainly worth it. After all, being part of a group and participating in swim team, scouts, or a youth group can foster a sense of belonging in your child with learning disabilities and is one way you can help him feel more significant (Chervin, 1986). In addition, it is very good for you—his parent—to see your child in a successful activity. You, too, may profit from elevation of self-esteem, especially in regards to raising a child who has difficulties fitting into society. As your child is accepted into a group of children, and as other families get to know your family in a positive light, everyone feels better and acceptance of the entire family can improve.

Joe's self-esteem will build as he becomes an accepted member of a group. He may be invited to participate in other activities with some of the same children; he will develop some more appropriate social skills, acquire skills in photography, get some vocational experience, and have fun.

It is important to note here, however, that not all parents should feel obligated to make the time commitment necessary for this plan of action. If you feel that you do not have the time, energy, or willingness to commit to this idea, you are no less of a parent than the parent who chooses this option. It is not the writers' intent to make you feel that you are not doing your job because you do not implement this plan. Also, keep in mind that some children are just not interested in exerting themselves, regardless of how hard you try to get them involved. Similar to other activities in one's life, recreation has to be personally suited to the individual and he needs to be a willing participant.

Stack the Deck for Team Sports

When tryouts for the basketball team are announced, everyone who is going to be on the team already has the skills he needs. When the chorus auditions, all its potential members already have a full repertoire of songs. This is a simple fact, but not always obvious to the casual observer. These activities have almost always been scheduled long before they are announced.

If these are of interest to your child, you or your child should contact the Principal's office and get this schedule well in advance.

A child with a learning disability may take longer to learn, may need the skill broken down into each part, may need one-on-one help to become proficient in a particular sport or activity, or may not be well suited for coordinated sports. Well before tryouts is the time to practice and perfect all skills necessary for a successful audition; or, if your child shows no talent or is not well suited for sports that require coordination, now is the time to decide that perhaps involvement in coordinated sports is not a reality for your child. Regardless of your personal situation, anticipate difficulties well in advance of the event.

Some children are more easily integrated into existing activities than Joe. It may take some children longer to become successful at a particular skill, but with help it can be arranged. Tutors are available formally or informally. Basically, a tutor is anyone who is well accomplished in a particular skill and capable of passing along this knowledge. A high school student may be an excellent basketball coach for the junior high student who aspires to be on the team. A retired music teacher may have plenty of time to give singing lessons to a student with a love of music but no repertoire. This is true for almost all sports and recreational skills. Ice skating, swimming, football, tennis, photography, drama, music, art, or dance can be enhanced with expert help and coaching. If you know your child's weak points, you can identify his strong points and work with the school in establishing the most effective way of tutoring. If the Olympic athlete practices to perfect his performance, so can the novice. As Jhoon Rhee, karate master, once said to a group of students with coordination difficulties, "I used to be a kid who couldn't do any of this." All things being unequal, practice does not necessarily make perfect, but it sure can make adequate.

Keep **stacking the deck.** A student who is striving for adequacy should try out for a team with the fewest number of people trying out. If tennis is less popular than basketball, encourage the child with learning disabilities to try out for the tennis team. If the band includes many trumpet players and no tuba players, buy him a tuba. If the swim team has unlimited membership, swimming lessons may be a great birthday present.

Practicing and striving for adequacy can have side effects also. A student who persists and works hard may turn out to have a hidden talent. Only good can come from trying hard and learning to work at something until you become proficient. Your child will feel more capable and have a better self-esteem if you help him find his own abilities and allow him time to pursue them (White, 1985). If he's a good swimmer, don't neglect swimming because he's too busy with tutors for his academic classes.

Another side effect involves other students who participate in an activity with children with learning disabilities. They will become aware that everyone can learn to do something well. By accepting a peer with a disability, children will grow into accepting adults who will become employers, neighbors, and friends. All the work and time families put into organizing and running scout troops, youth groups, and little league teams will be measured in the success their children can experience as adults in a society of people who have learned acceptance.

Whatever seems right for you and your child's situation is what should be done.

Other alternatives for a child with learning disabilities, or one who may have difficulties in a competitive sport, are activities in which one competes primarily with oneself. Karate, swimming, bowling, gymnastics, and golf do not necessitate team involvement. The goal of each is self-improvement. These activities, however, are not necessarily done alone. Gymnastics and bowling take place in groups, but don't have to be teams. Persons practicing karate wear a ghee and perform their routine in a specific place with other people. Even swimming involves a uniform swimming suit and drill with one's teammates. Practice can be done alone; yet, the regularly scheduled lessons and events are done in a group. An option is for the child to join a team later, if he so chooses. All of the above activities are recreational, social to an extent, and can be noncompetitive.

Some Children are Easier than Others

Many children with learning disabilities may have great out-of-class strengths like Susan. For the child with sports skills or artistic talent, integration may be relatively easy to arrange. Families may need to work with coaches and other recreation leaders on misconceptions about learning

disabilities and do some personal handicap awareness training.

Adults who are unfamiliar with special education settings and disabilities in general may be uncomfortable about integrating children with special needs into their groups. A leader who has no experience with learning disabilities is someone who is not going to advocate for integration. Parents can play an active and successful role in awareness training. Talk to the coach and make him comfortable about talking frankly with your family. Arrange a meeting at a time which is convenient for him. This may be a time which is not particularly convenient for you; yet, most employers allow time off for a teacher conference and this is more-or-less the same idea. This is a time to make yourself available to the coach should he have any questions or concerns. Remember, strengths are most apparent where no one will notice the weaknesses. Explain your child's strengths and why you think he would be valuable to the team or activity. By emphasizing your child's strengths, you should diminish the coach's fears about what special education students cannot do. You must make a decision as to the most effective approach to take with coaches or leaders in a variety of settings. Whatever seems right for you and your child's situation is what should be done.

While the basic goals of recreation are diversion, relaxation, and fun, other aspects of recreation can benefit all children.

While the basic goals of recreation are diversion, relaxation, and fun, other aspects of recreation can benefit all children. The development of team spirit, cooperation, skill, and physical strength are well accepted values of recreation. For the child with learning disabilities, these goals are frequently vital to development.

We began this discussion by talking about the three systems of support—family, school, and peer group—which contribute to the growth of an individual. For these systems to be balanced, peer group acceptance for the child with learning disabilities may be best found in recreational settings. Why leave this opportunity to chance?

This issue brief is a result of experiences gathered from interviews with parents who represent a variety of backgrounds and whose years of experience of living with a child with special needs have established them as "seasoned" consumers.

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